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THE DEAD BRIDAL.

A VENETIAN TALE OF THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY

BY JONATHAN FREKE SLINGSBY.

CHAPTER V.

"I arise from dreams of thee
 In the first sweet sleep of night,
 When the winds are breathing low,
 And the stars are shining bright.
 I arise from dreams of thee,
 And a spirit in my feet.
 Has led me—who knows how?
 To thy chamber window, sweet!"—*Shelley.*

We think it may be safely laid down as a sure evidence that civilisation is advancing in any age of the world, in which we see that microcosm, the domestic mansion, like the great world which it mimics, reduced from a state of chaotic communism, and divided into separate and independent kingdoms. It is a good symptom when the man of art first thinks of separating for himself an apartment where he can establish his workshop, the man of science his laboratory, the man of letters his studio; wherein each may fence himself in securely, and ply his craft or his brains without the risk of interruption or intrusion from those around him. Aye, it is even a great thing in its way, when the buttery and the cellar arise and are erected into acknowledged domains, with their own special rights and privileges attached to them; when the cook hath his kitchen wherein he may unmolestedly exercise his culinary alchemy, watching the moment of projection, delighting himself with his roast and his boiled, his fat things of the earth, and his cunning combinations of comestibles, and ruling imperiously over scullions; when the butler can tap his butt of wine in peace, smelling its odour and tasting its flavour, and there be none to see how he flirts with the flask, or what "love passages" may take place between him and the pottle-pot.

But we hold it that the highest point of economical polity (a science which we would have you to remember is totally diverse from that hallucination called political economy) is never attained until the rights of the gynæceum are conceded, and the lady's boudoir is an acknowledged empire amongst the domestic dynasties. When once the ruder inmates of the common dwelling begin to feel the sanctity that belongs to the fairer sex, and by common consent yield to them a portion of territory which they may hold as their own against all males—then, indeed, civilisation has reached the summit of its elevation. For ourselves, we confess that there is no portion of the human dwelling which we hold in higher estimation or love more to penetrate than the boudoir of the lady, especially if it be the bower of the intellectual and the beautiful. We love an excursion of the sort with all our hearts—whether it be in visiting the castle or the palace of the days gone by, where we still see, as it were, the traces of the footprints and smell the odour of the flowers that still floats and lingers in the atmosphere which the young and the fair once hallowed—or, furnished with the talismanic passport that admits us into the interior of the modern mansion, we find the monarch in her realms, the divinity in her shrine.

And in good truth, if man would really wish to know woman—and what man is there that would not aspire to that knowledge, difficult though it be?—we counsel him by all means to make acquaintance with her in her boudoir. There every thing is cognate and congenial to her mind, speaks her prevailing tastes, testifies to her nature and disposition. Talk to her if you will, and as you may, when in the ball-room, or in the park—yet, while you listen to her words or mark her looks, trust them not implicitly; remember that they may be in part the echo of fashion or the result of art. But when you enter her boudoir, her own private and congenial retreat, address yourself less to her than to the insentient things around you. See what they are that minister to her delights, or form, as it were, her necessities. Mark the book that she has last been reading—the song that she has last been singing—find what scenes her fingers love to sketch—whether she

makes to herself friends of sweet-voiced birds, and bright-eyed flowers—scrutinise narrowly all around her, and discover if she loves the beautiful, the orderly, the pure; or if her heart be caught by the gaudy, the brilliant, the sensuous;—do all this, and trust us, you will know more of the fair mistress in her boudoir in one hour, than you would be able to find out in a year's superficial association when she is fenced around and disguised by the conventionalities and the formalities of life.

Well, now that we have given you our thoughts upon a lady's boudoir, step in with us after old Giudetta, out of the twilight air; for you remember that she and her young mistress, Bianca Morosini, have just left the balcony and passed into the chamber within,—pass in, we pray you, and you shall survey the boudoir of a Venetian lady of the fourteenth century.

The shadows of the evening were beginning to steal through the apartment as they entered; the young girl stepped up to a table which stood in the centre of the floor, and taking up a small silver hand-bell, she rang it twice. After a moment's interval, a little Moorish boy, dressed in a long white tunic, trimmed with gold, and gathered in with a belt round the waist, entered from the farther end of the room, bearing in his hand a small lamp, and, at a sign from his mistress, he lighted a large massive chandelier that hung from the centre of the ceiling. As the illumination increased, one might observe the apartment, not indeed as accurately as in the daylight, yet, perhaps, to more advantage in some respects, for the rays from the chandelier threw out a soft light that fell upon the deep cornices, and projected long shadows of the columns and carvings upon the wall and the floor. Let us, then, with such light as we now have, describe the chamber even as it existed at that period, and, for aught we know, may still exist—for he who sees the city of Venice, will see even yet in many of her palaces, now hired out to wealthy foreigners or converted into public hotels, much of the ancient splendour of their once princely possessors, intact or but little changed. A saddening sight, and fraught with that sort of painful interest with which one contemplates the form of some beautiful dead, arrayed in the ornaments of earthly grandeur, while the glory of life is departed from it for ever! In shape, the room was nearly square, measuring about three and twenty English feet in each direction—dimensions which showed it was not to be classed amongst the principal apartments of the palazzo, but was one of those delightful retreats, the position of which Italian architects so well understood in the arrangements of their domestic buildings.

We have already noticed, that from the centre of the ceiling a large chandelier depended. It was of massive bronze work, consisting of six panelled facets, from which projected three tiers of arms branching out into numerous candelabra: in each of these last was a large waxen candle, a luxury with which the Venetians were at that time familiar. The lamp itself was suspended by a thick rope of crimson silk, and to the foliated boss in which it terminated was attached a shorter rope of the same colour and material, finished with a rich gland and tassel.

Nothing could be more tasteful than the window through which Bianca had just entered from the balcony. It stood in a recess in the southern extremity of the room, which one entered from the latter by an ascent of three easy, marble steps. The casement was divided into two valves separated

by a Corinthian column of red marble forming the style, at the foot of which reposed a water-god holding a shell, while at each side pilasters of the same material and order supported the semicircular arch which formed the top of the window. At the opposite extremity of the room the eye discovered an alcove, the front of which was richly wrought in arabesque. In this stood a sleeping-couch: the silken curtains were held up at each side by Cupids, and at the angles were plumes of ostrich feathers.

The furniture of the room was in keeping with its architecture. Beneath the lamp was a table covered with a cloth of crimson velvet, stiff with richly-wrought flowers, its fringed edges reaching to the ground. An ivory crucifix stood upon the table, and near it lay an open book of devotion, beyond which was a little casket of dark wood inlaid with mother-of-pearl. A large sofa or settee, with high back and sides stuffed, and upholstered in flowered silk, stood at some distance; while a few low-seated chairs with long, high backs of similar fashion were placed throughout the apartment. Upon one of the walls was affixed an octangular mirror; at either side hung three-quarter-length portraits, the one of a doge in his ducal mantle and horned bonnet, the other of a cavalier in full armour. A portrait of a woman, apparently a young and beautiful matron, surmounted the glass.

The floor was tessellated with small squares of white marble, at the intersections of which were inserted little corner-pieces of black stone, the entire being highly polished. The ceiling was elaborately beautiful. It was divided by a great number of transverse beams, whose gilded edges upon their white ground caught the rays of light, while the deep coffers or panels thus formed contained each a florid centre-piece of stucco-work, representing bunches of grapes, intertwined with the tendrils and leaves of the vine, that hung down almost to the level of the ribs of the coffers. Round the room ran a rich deep cornice, beneath which was an entablature, having antique bas-reliefs along it, and under this was a line of leaf-work that separated the whole from the walls. These last were painted of a delicate pale green colour.

We hope that our readers can now form a tolerably accurate notion of the boudoir of Bianca Morosini—an apartment where she spent much of her time, and one that was all the dearer to her that it had been also the favourite chamber of her mother, and one of the few memorials still left of the wealth and greatness of a family now somewhat reduced in circumstances.

The young lady sat down on one of the low chairs near the table, and opposite to the mirror, and after a little time proceeded to make preparation for what has been in all ages and climes a very solemn and important act with ladies—namely, her evening toilet. First, she removed the velvet band from her brows, and suffered the long masses of her brown hair to fall down her neck and backward over her shoulders; whereupon good old Giudetta took her place behind the chair of her mistress, and began to busy herself in arranging the tresses for the night, while the little page stood in readiness to supply from time to time such appliances as the fashion of the times rendered indispensable for the purpose of dressing the hair. We must, however, confess that we approach this interesting subject with much diffidence, seeing that, with the honourable exception of perruquiers, men are but little skilled in the details of the coiffure. Let it suffice, then, to say, that after a due application of perfumes and unguents, and when the brush had done its duty, the tresses were woven skilfully into large braids, and once more confined not ungracefully within the fillet. Other operations in the arrangement of the person, which we shall not attempt to describe, succeeded, and Bianca's evening toilette was completed. The old woman, in the meantime, renewed her gossip, and sought to amuse her young mistress with that description of familiar conversation, which it has immemorially been at once the province and the privilege of a favoured attendant to administer. Then came the evening meal, a solitary one, for Bianca was now living in almost conventional seclusion since the departure of her guardian, the Count Polani, from Venice. When the supper was concluded, the little page, at the bidding of his mistress, took

up a lute, and played, not without a certain amount of skill and taste, some of the barcaroles which at that period formed the favourite subjects of song for the gondoliers up the canals and lagunes, for the day had not yet come when the verses of Tasso were to be as household words with every singer. The boy continued to sing for a considerable time, but the lady appeared to give but little attention to him. In truth, her thoughts were not with the songs, nor the subjects of them, but had wandered away back to the happy days when she and Giulio sat, and sang, and played together beneath the summer skies. Giudetta at length perceived that her mistress took but little note of the minstrel's efforts, though, indeed, the boy did his best to win a smile of approval or a kind word from the young lady. Seeing this, the old woman, who, to say the truth, was no great judge of melody, set the matter down to the fault of the performer, and not to that of his fair auditress—a very natural and commendable conclusion in a loving old nurse. So, without more ado, she fell to rating the youth soundly.

"Beshrew thee, Hamet! I know not what has come over thee to-night! Why, boy, thy fingers fall as heavily upon the strings, as if thou hadst lead upon the tips of them. And thy voice; by my troth, 'tis as husky as old Lazaro's, the aquaiolo, that sells the iced water in the Giardini publici!"

The boy looked up with an angry flash of his dark eye, but ere he could speak, Giudetta continued:

"Che diavolo vuoli? What the devil dost thou mean, child, by thrumming all those old ditties that I remember since I was a little girl?"

"Nay, Giudetta, thou art over-hard on Hamet," said Bianca. "In good sooth, I do not think he sings amiss to night, though it may be that I am not of the mind to do him full justice. But tell me, Hamet, hast thou learned no new song of late? If thou hast, let me hear it; thou wilt do me a pleasure and Giudetta too, as she loves not old songs, it would seem."

"Giudetta loves nothing old, signora," said the boy—and then added, in a malicious undertone, just loud enough to be heard by her for whom it was intended—"Save herself."

"Ah, Birbone!" retorted the nurse in the same tone "marry but I shall mend thy manners for thee when next I meet thee in the *tinello*, I promise thee."

"So please you, signora," proceeded Hamet, "I learned this very day a new barcarola. I heard a Zingaro singing it to a vielle up the Riva dei Schiavoni, and I loitered after him till I got it off by heart. Is it your pleasure to hear it?"

"Yes, indeed, Hamet. Thou shalt sing it for me; and if thou art perfect in thy measure, I promise that Guidetta herself shall praise thee."

"Oh surely, surely, my dear child," replied the nurse, "he shall have his deserts from me; but if I catch him at a false note, why—"

The youth resumed his lute, and preluded the notes of a simple but pleasing melody, just then introduced into Venice, but which afterwards became very popular; indeed we have ourselves listened often to it on a fine autumn evening upon the Giudecca, and we doubt not that he who visits to-day the Sea-Queen, may find that the strain is still in fashion. The words are in the dialect of Venice; we shall essay to render the sense at least into our own language:

UNA BARCAROLA VENEZIANA.

"A black-ey'd maiden holds me
In Cupid's toils a prey,
Th' assassin's wife enfolds me,
And steals my heart away.
Alas! alas! I languish,
I die of love's soft anguish—
Un T, un I, un A, un M, un O.
All fair have bosoms chilling
To passion's kindling beam,
Their fickle hearts ne'er feeling
Love's faithful, steady flame.
Alas! alas! I languish,
I die of love's soft anguish,
Un T, un I, un A, un M, un O."

"What means, I pray, the spell
The spell thou chant'st to me?"
"It means—I dare not tell—
It means—that I love thee!
I love thee, dearest, ever,
I'll cease to love, oh never—
Un T, un I, un A, un M, un O."

"In faith thou hast sung bravely, Hamet," said Giudetta, when the song was concluded. "'Tis a rare pretty barcarola, and hath a very pleasant burden, 'Un T, un I, un A, un M, un O.' Per Bacco, the lover took an artful way to make the black-eyed beauty learn what he meant; but I think she was over slow at reading the riddle."

"Truly, yes, dear nurse," said Bianca. "It seems to me that she who had learned her hornbook could put the letters together and find that the youth sang to her 'Ti amo.'"

"Ah! well-a-day! well-a-day!" said old Giudetta with a gentle sigh; "it brings back to my mind the days when I was a little girl—and the young men used to say to me, just as the youth did in the song, that I was cruel and faithless, and—"

"Nay, but Giudetta," asked the girl, smiling, "thou surely wert not all that?"

"Was I not! was I not, indeed! Ay, by my faith, but I was though, as well as the best donzella in the city, I can tell thee, my child—that is, I don't mean to say that I was so *very* cruel; but I was fickle and hoity-toity and hard to be pleased, as well as my betters, I promise you. Why, look you, my dear child, I remember it as if it were but yesterday; there was Giambattista Zucharello, the confectioner, in the Terra Nuova; well, when first he saw me at mass one Sunday at the Chiesa di San Nicolo, why, what do you think, but—"

At this moment the sound of the bell of the great clock of St. Mark's came borne from the city, striking the hour. The very first stroke had the double effect of interrupting an incipient yawn which was just beginning to distend the pretty mouth of the young lady, and of cutting short the narrative of the old woman, by causing her wrinkled mouth to open to the full width for the purpose of emitting an ejaculation of astonishment. Were it not for these two results of the iron tongue of old Time, it is hard to say what might have happened to either of those personages. The former might possibly have passed from the oscitant to the comatose state; and the latter, in all probability, would have lost herself in the labyrinth of her ancient memories, and gone wandering up and down through a long life of those little love-adventures which the ladies'-maids at Venice, unless they be sadly belied by all historians, ancient and modern, indulged themselves very freely in, even while they were faithfully attached to their mistresses.

"Santissima Virgine!" cried Giudetta, "why, I declare 'tis three hours since the Ave Maria. Bless me, who would have believed it? And here am I, talking away, just as if I had nothing in the world to think of or to look to. Well, well, I must hurry to the cucino, for I promised old Eufemia Zoppo to give her some of my famous unguent for her lameness, and her little daughter, Doris, will be waiting for it. Should you want me again, signora, you will ring and I shall attend you."

Giudetta, thus speaking, hurried out of the room, upon what further cares intent we take not upon us to investigate. Bianca smiled as she watched the bustling movements of her good old nurse, and after a few minutes she turned to the page, and said,

"And now, Hamet, thou too mayst leave me. I shall not need thy voice or lute again to-night, as I would read somewhat before retiring to rest."

So saying, she waved her hand kindly to the boy, and the next moment she was alone in her boudoir.

The young girl took up the illuminated missal from the stand upon which it was placed, and turned over the leaves to a page that was marked with a cord of blue and silver twist; then she crossed herself, and commenced to read, occupying herself for a time intently and devoutly with the evening service of the church.

It was a spectacle highly picturesque, and not without a solemn interest, to see that fair young girl, sitting alone in the

still night, and in the midst of this rich apartment, withdrawing herself for a season from all worldly thoughts, and lifting up her meek, pure, simple heart to heaven. The soft light from the lamp fell down upon the masses of her thick, rich hair, and touched it as with streaks of gold, till she looked like a Magdalene, with all of her love and nothing of her sin,—while statue, and column, and pilaster, and all the rich carvings and antique furniture, flung strange, grotesque shadows over the walls and along the floor, stretching onward till they met, and chequered without mingling with the faint white starlight that flowed in through the still open window.

And thus Bianca read and prayed, but after awhile her thoughts apparently wandered from the contemplation of the mysteries of the divine nature to those scarce less engrossing mysteries of our own; for now indeed her heart turned to earthly things, while her eyes still rested upon the things that belonged to heaven. At length she suffered the volume to fall upon her knees, and she surrendered herself entirely to a reverie, half sad, half pleasing. The intelligence which Giudetta had brought from Venice of the return of Giulio Polani from his travels had awakened in her mind, in all their freshness, a thousand fond memories which time and absence had subdued; and she wondered at the fidelity with which the scenes of her life, from childhood to the hour when she and her brother-friend had parted, seemed to have been treasured up in her heart, and now re-appeared at the summons of his name, who in each and all of them bore a prominent part. But now for the first time there mingled with these thoughts a feeling of positive pain, though the contemplation of them often before brought a not unpleasing sadness. Despite of the estimate of the gossip of her nurse, and the silly boasting of Tommaso, she could not help experiencing a sensation of uneasiness, not so much at the thought that Giulio was courted by others, for, in truth, it appeared only natural to her that all should admire him; but the possibility that he might return the love of some of those fair admirers of whom she heard, or that, at all events, their charms might have weakened in his heart the love which she would have him feel for herself—was inexpressibly distressing to her. As long as she had been accustomed to think of him as one who had no regard for any other woman—whatever might be his feelings towards herself—she knew not the force or depth of her own passion. But now that the touchstone was applied, the throb of her heart told her how strong and how engrossing was her love. In vain she took herself to task upon a subject on which the human heart will not be schooled. In vain she said to herself again and again, "Why should I be jealous of a love which I know not that I ever possessed? Should I not be contented with the love that a brother gives to a sister? And have I not had that always, and shall I not have it still? What right have I to look for more? He can break no faith to me who has plighted none. Let me take heed that he shall not discover the weakness of my heart, lest he despise a love which was bestowed before it was sought." Idle casuistry! Who has ever found it availng? The springs of the heart will not thus be dried up nor its current arrested. Pride or vanity, a stern sense of duty, or the chilling breath of worldliness, or the voice of calculating prudence, may, and often does, enable us to hide the feelings we cannot destroy, as the ice clothes with a hard, and smooth, and even a bright surface the face of the rippling stream; but beneath it still the wave heaves, and flows, and runs on silently, unseen, unchangingly along its predestined course and in its accustomed channel. Trust not its cold and sluggish repose. The first beam of sunshine, the first rush of stormy rain, will break the hard crust in pieces, and give the living waters again to life and light!

In pensive musings such as we have attempted to describe the hours wore on with Bianca Morosini, till night was already somewhat advanced. Within doors all was silent. Without, the sounds of life came rarer and more rare on the ear, theplash of some fisherman's oar as he returned late from his evening's toil to haul up his boat upon the sand, or the wild sad cry of the lonely sea-bird, which the refreshing air of the night rustled through the awning of the veranda, and strayed

into the chamber through the open casement. Suddenly the sound of music rose upon the breeze—the sound of guitar-strings swept by no unpractised hand. Bianca listened with surprise; such sounds at such a time and place were by no means usual; the gallants of Venice rarely wandered so far from the lagunes, and Hamet, surely, was not up and about at such an hour as this. Her doubts on this head were speedily removed, for a voice now gave meaning to the music, and that voice was not Hamet's; it was fuller and deeper than the boy's, and breathed more tenderness and passion than he had yet learned to express. Bianca listened breathlessly, and with a feeling of timidity, that, notwithstanding, had a tinge of pleasurable curiosity mingled with it. The melody was one which she had herself sung a thousand times—the words were new to her, but each of them fell distinctly on her ear: one might render them somewhat after this manner in our own tongue:—

“ ZITTI, ZITELLA, ZITTI.”

“ Deeply o'er Adrian's waters
The pale stars are spreading their light;
Brightest of Adrian's daughters
Look on the beautiful night.
The mariner home wending slowly,
Still blesses those lights in the skies—
I watch with a worship more holy
The stars of my love in thine eyes.
List, dearest, list to the measure
True love is breathing to thee,
Hush! while my heart tells its pleasure,
Zitti, Zitella, Zitti!

“ See, o'er the still waters breaking,
The flushings of morning appear!
To thy lattice I look for the waking
Of a day-dawn more sunny and dear.
Night is all lustre and gladness,
If lit by thy presence it be;
While day seems but shadow and sadness
If thou art not looking on me.
List, dearest, list to the measure,
True love is breathing to thee!
Hush! while my heart tells its pleasure—
Zitti, Zitella, Zitti!”

The sound of the song ceased, and all was again still as before. Bianca knew not what to think of this strange minstrelsy. At length, after wearying herself with all sorts of conjectures, she concluded that some wandering musician, perhaps the one whom Hamet had heard in the morning, had found his way along the shore of the Adriatic, and, attracted by the light that streamed out of the open window upon the night, had made this essay of his “gay science” in the hope that his song might reach the ear of some yet-waking maiden. As she made up her mind to this solution, and was preparing to rise and make her arrangements for retiring to rest, a slight noise as of one in the balcony struck upon her ear. The sound alarmed her, yet she scarce knew why, for the thought of danger in such seclusion had never before occurred to her. She looked up, and perceived a figure muffled in a cloak standing between the window and the starlight. Starting from her seat in terror, she uttered a low scream, and was about to fly, when the figure sprang forward and caught her in his arms. The cloak was flung open, the mask cast aside, the guitar thrown on the table; and Bianca Morosini looks upon the smiling face and sparkling eyes of Giulio Polani.

It was some time before the young maiden recovered from the agitation, pleasurable though it was, which the unexpected appearance of Giulio caused her, for she fully believed he was at that moment at the further side of the lagunes beyond Venice. The first sentiment which her countenance expressed was, if we may be so imprudent as to make public a lady's emotions, that of delight. But then she speedily came to a due sense of propriety and prudery and so forth, which aided her marvellously in checking and concealing her natural feelings—a course which we think very commendable, and such as all discreet young ladies, especially in this our highly artificial state of society, should practise. So, there-

fore, after the cordial greeting and fond embrace—such as a brother and sister might share with propriety, though it was perhaps a little warmer and longer than those relatives always feel it necessary to indulge in—Bianca withdrew herself from the young man's arms, and assuming as composed a demeanour as she could, she again seated herself upon the chair. Giulio imitated her example, and sat down upon another, which he drew tolerably close to his sister.

“ My dear Giulio,” said the girl, after a pause sufficiently embarrassing, and assuming at the same time an air of maidenly severity,—“ My dear Giulio, though I own I am very glad to see you come home again, yet indeed I am almost disposed to scold you for this very unexpected intrusion—and at such an hour too! You have really disturbed me very much.”

The young man looked at her with an expression of mock penitence, beneath which she could perceive an air of easy gaiety that seemed to indicate that the young gentleman had an exceedingly good opinion of himself, and did not apprehend any serious results from the lady's displeasure.

The girl was piqued, and added with some spirit,—

“ In truth, signore, the maidens of Venice have not yet learned the outlandish fashions of the dames of France and their courtiers, with whom I hear you have been consorting. We receive not gentlemen by night, save upon invitation, and that too in society. It is not considerate, nay, I will say, it is not kind of you to ——”

“ Dear sister Bianca,” said the youth, interrupting her with a tender seriousness, “ if I have really offended or pained you, I entreat your pardon; for, believe me, your displeasure would be punishment enough for a greater fault even than that. But will you make no allowance for the eagerness of a brother's love? Could I be so near Venice, and yet wait throughout the long hours till day, when I might see you and speak to you by journeying a short space in the evening? You do not censure my affection, surely? You do not wish it to be less, Bianca?”

“ No, indeed, brother,” cried the young girl, a blush spreading over her pallid cheek. “ Believe me, Giulio, I would not that time or distance or new friends should make you think less of the old ones.”

“ They have not, indeed they have not,” said the young man, interrupting her.

“ But then,” continued Bianca with a pleased smile, “ there was no need, you know, for coming to us in this masquerading fashion, and at such an hour, too. Why did you not come a few hours sooner, and knock at the front entrance beneath the portico, instead of stealing in through the window like a thief at midnight?”

“ Why, in good faith, dear Bianca,” replied Giulio, “ as to coming earlier than I have come, that was impracticable, simply for want of time. When I sent Tommaso forward from Maestre yesterday, I had not intended to proceed further till morning myself, but the fellow had no sooner gone than I felt a home-longing come over my heart so strongly that I could not resist it. So I followed in a few hours after him, and reached Venice in the evening.”

“ Ah, Giudetta had left the Palazzo Polani before you reached it,” interposed Bianca.

“ She had indeed, and well freighted, I doubt not, with Tommaso's marvellous stories. Well, I found none but servants at the Palazzo, amongst whom my worthy valet had created quite a sensation, filling their heads with all sorts of traveller's tales about himself.”

“ And some about his master too, it would seem, Giulio.”

“ Oh, of course,” replied Giulio, “ a good servant, I warrant me, never loses an opportunity of magnifying his master. So while that gentleman was edifying the maidens and grooms in the *tinello*, I slipt quietly away, and stept into a gondola, with cloak, mask, and guitar, as you see, and found my way, quite naturally, hither and to your own balcony, dear Bianca; then I saw the light still burning, so I sang a song to find out if you were awake, and not receiving any response, which you must admit was rather unmannerly, why—I just stept in the shortest way (clambering up the carved work, as I used to do

when a boy) to receive your thanks for my minstrelsy—and not to get a scolding, unkind sister, Bianca."

" And, indeed, thou dost well merit a scolding, Giulio, though thou hast not got it. What would the matrons of Venice say, if they were to know that Bianca Morosini listened to serenaders near midnight, or if some prying eyes had seen you clambering into the balcony?"

" Why, they would give their eyes, dear Bianca, for such a story, and they would run about with it through all the palazzi of the city, hobbling along on their *chopines* at the risk of their necks—and then they would find out the next day that it was only Giulio Polani—your brother Giulio—that had come home and did what he was wont to do when a boy, and so they would be ready to drown themselves in the Giudecca for vexation and disappointment."

Bianca smiled at the lively sally of the young man, but a sigh soon chased away the smile, as she said,—

" Ah, dear Giulio, you know we are no longer children, and so we must not do a thousand things that we were used to do."

" And why not, pray, most prudish sister?"

" Because we of Venice, Giulio, are more discreet, or more prudish if you will have it, than the fair dames and demoiselles with whom I hear you have been spending your time so pleasantly."

" Ah, diavolo!" cried the young man, " that cursed 'Maso has been at his old tricks again, I perceive: the rascal's tongue is never easy except when 'tis wagging. Come now, sister, tell me what the fellow has been saying about me."

The girl blushed deeply, and said, in a tone of reserve,—

" I assure you, Giulio, I am not in the habit of suffering the idle gossip of menials to be repeated to me. If you have made your valet your confidant, your secrets, so far as I am concerned, are in perfectly safe keeping."

" But I have *not* made the rascal my confidant, Bianca, and I have no secrets—at least none that I would confide to him. No, no; my secrets have all been kept for thy ear, my sweet sister. And now, shall I tell you one of them?"

" Nay, Giulio," said the girl—and her heart fluttered as she spoke—" that must depend entirely upon yourself. I am not your confessor, as Father Chrysostom was."

" Ah, dear old Father Chrysostom! Well, as he is not at hand, I will even confide it to your own ear. Listen, then. I have now been travelling some years, wandering up and down the world, in strange scenes and strange company; seeing many fair faces, and making some true friends, I hope; yet have I never forgotten those fairer and dearer ones whom I left at home behind me; and now that I have come back and seen *one* of them again, that one seems to have grown in my heart during absence, as she has grown in form and loveliness."

The young man spoke in a tone of much tenderness, that appeared for a moment even agitated with emotion; yet there was something of gallantry about the speech itself, and the smile which accompanied it, that made it difficult to determine how much of what he said should be attributed to a love beyond that of a brotherly character—how much to the conventional courtesies of a travelled gentleman.

Poor Bianca! her heart trembled and throbbed at the ardour of language whose sincerity or real significance she feared to interpret as that heart would have wished. And so she answered vaguely but kindly, and said, how happy she was to find that Giulio's love for all his old friends had not given place to newer objects, and that travelling had not injured his heart, as she felt sure it had improved his mind.

And thus they continued to converse, renewing a thousand sweet memories—evoking from the past those spells which ever bind the heart in the strongest bondage—the recollections of early life, above all, of childhood, that most beautiful moral spring-tide of our existence, when the heart's virgin soil is still rich as the unbroken glebe, when the affections germinate quick and vigorous, and, with a true instinct that no worldliness has as yet misdirected, strike their roots sure and deep, and wind their tendrils enduringly round all that is congenial to their nature. Ah, there is nothing, after all, like the friendships of our young life! In after years we may,

often do, meet those whom we feel to be in every way superior to the mates of our childhood, whom our soberer judgments more approve—our maturer esteem more honours; but our love consecrates and cherishes them never, never as it does the objects of our earlier affections. These we embalm in our heart of hearts, keeping them ever fresh with all sweet and tender retrospections, which are as fragrant spices and aromatic gums;—these lie in our bosoms, like the seeds in the tombs of the Egyptian kings, buried unnoticed through ages during which other loves and friendships have arisen and flourished and died, while they preserve their vitality, ready, when again placed in congenial soil, to spring up with the pristine vigour of their young-world life!

At length the waning lights in the chamber, and the faint reflection of the twilight, admonished the two friends that it was high time to terminate their happy converse; and Bianca blushed as she reminded Giulio how many hours had fled since first he entered the apartment. There was no denying the fact, however unwilling he might feel to notice it, and so he rose, and, once more embracing the girl,—though it must be confessed that there was somewhat more embarrassment on both sides than in olden times,—Giulio left the boudoir, and sought one of the sleeping apartments with which he was already familiar.

Whether he slept or not that night, or how soon he was able to enter upon that most desirable refection, we shall not trouble ourselves with investigating; but certain it is that poor Bianca pressed sleeplessly her pillow, for her thoughts had got too much matter to occupy them. She compared the Giulio of to-night with the youth that had left his father's house upon his travels, and she acknowledged that the intervening time had done as much as time could do towards his improvement. To her fancy she had never seen one with a franker or manlier bearing, or more accomplished and graceful manners; and, to say the truth, in these respects she formed no over partial judgment. He was now just entering that period of life when the grace and sprightliness of youth blends so harmoniously with the dignity and power of manhood,—when the down has not all passed from the cheek, though the manlier moustache is covering the lip,—when the locks are yet silken and wavy upon the head, the light yet glittering and vivid in the eye, and all the pulses beat full and round and cheerily through the veins, without one click or check that can indicate a hitch or a shake in the wheels and springs of life. In a word, Giulio Polani was a very fine young fellow, and so any woman in the world would have unhesitatingly pronounced him, whether such sentence were to be passed in the streets of Venice or in any other city of the world, at the time of which we are writing, or at any other age or time down to that in which we now write. Bianca, as we said, thought as much, too, as she lay awake; and, upon the whole, her thoughts were very pleasurable. True it is, that while she felt her own love all the stronger for being thus fed again from the fountain-head, yet she had no positive assurance that Giulio's was yet more than of old towards her, in its character at least, though assuredly it was in its intensity; and then she had the consolation of being certified that at all events no other woman had won his heart, though, as he had observed, he had doubtless met with many suited to captivate his fancy, if not to touch his affections. And this was a very great matter; for whatever be the operations one projects, it is exceedingly desirable to have a clear stage and an unoccupied field to work on. It takes a world of time and labour, often, to remove the *debris* of some former shrine before you can attempt to erect a new temple; but with ground unappropriated, and a reasonable monopoly of time and opportunities, he or she is but a clumsy artificer who will not be able to throw up a stronghold, and maintain it for a long time, if not, indeed, for ever, against all assailants. Thinking some of these thoughts,—though we dare say she did not refine upon her feelings, or those of him she loved, as far as we have done,—the fair Bianca at length closed her eyes, just about the time that morning opened her eyes upon the heavens above Venice; and so we leave her to her slumbers.